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ABSTRACT

This article: (1) profiles kindergarten policies and practices currently implemented in district schools; (2) analyzes the research supporting the major policy alternatives for six common kindergarten and school entry age issues that all school districts must address; and (3) identifies the optimum policy option alternative for each issue based on the analyses. The six issues are entry age, placement criteria, retention practices, reading instruction, teaching strategies and instructional resources, and length of kindergarten day. Three alternative policies are identified for each issue. Taken as a whole, the recommended policy alternatives provide a model for early childhood education for schools and districts. The policies define a developmentally appropriate kindergarten curriculum which should optimize the early learning and future achievement level of all children. A total of 102 references are cited. The Innocence Rating Scale for school district kindergarten policy options is provided. (RH)

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Kindergarten Educational Policies: Separating Myth from Reality

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Kindergarten Educational Policies: Separating Myth from Reality

Abstract

The critical question facing school districts today is, "What policies should we pursue to improve both the quality and accessibility of early educational programs for *all* children?" Toward the goal of maximizing the academic growth and development of all children, this article: (1) profiles current kindergarten policies and practices currently implemented in district schools, (2) reviews and analyzes the research supporting the major policy alternatives for six common kindergarten and school entry age issues that all school districts must address, and (3) identifies the optimum policy option alternative for each issue based on these analyses. Collectively, the policy alternatives recommended provide a model for early childhood education for schools and districts. These policies define a more developmentally appropriate kindergarten curriculum which should optimize the early learning and future achievement level of all children.

Kindergarten Educational Policies: Separating Myth from Reality

Bloom (1981) aptly pointed out that we are "innocent" in implementing educational policies when it is unclear as to what we should and should not do. That is, when the evidence to support implementing one policy alternative is no more compelling than that supporting another. He went on to caution, however, that we are no longer innocent when there is sufficient evidence to causally link specific policy alternatives to schooling effects. Once this linkage has been firmly established, if we ignore the finding and continue to implement other alternatives, then we are liable for the consequences.

This notion applies directly to several aspects of early education today. Many kindergarten and school entry age policies are based on educational myths rather than on established research findings and sound professional judgement. Evidence supporting this line of reasoning first began to appear in the 1960's with the extensive examination of educational environments affecting young children (e.g. Bloom, 1964; Hunt, 1963). These were followed by the results of the schooling effects studies of the 1970's and 80's. Now, as we enter the 1990's, many empirical studies have been completed and have validated the analyses, theories, and speculations about early childhood that began earlier. Strong linkages have been established between specific early educational policies of both parents and schools and important schooling effects variables such as student achievement, attitudes, literacy levels, and drop-out rates, measured both concurrently and later in life (e.g., Hanson and Siegel, 1988). Hence, school policy makers can no longer plead innocence for implementing early educational policies that are couched in

myths and outdated norms rather than supported by research; they are now accountable for them. They have a legal, ethical, and professional obligation to implement the more educationally advantageous policies as defined by the policy research that has emerged over the past several decades. To do otherwise could be viewed as a form of educational malpractice.

Although some "lag" is to be expected between the time research is carried out and results are used to change policies, the delay in implementing innovative early education policies is difficult to justify. For example, there is overwhelming evidence from the research community to support specific school entry age and kindergarten policies (e.g., Gersten and George, 1990; Arnbach, 1985; Goodlad, 1983). Yet, surveys show only a few school districts are implementing these recommended changes with most districts continuing with many of the same policies and practices known to result in less than optimal achievement for students (Wolf and Kessler, 1987; Educational Research Service (ERS) Report, 1986). Since research also shows that schools have the potential to make a significant difference in the educational achievement level of young children (e.g., Hanson and Schutz, 1978), the time is right to sort through existing early educational policies and identify those kindergarten and school entry age policies that can be treated as goals to be implemented in our nation's public schools.

Toward this end, this article seeks to provide three kinds of information: (1) a brief profile of the kindergarten policies and practices currently being implemented in district schools, (2) a review of the research on the policy alternatives for each of six common kindergarten and school entry age issues that all districts must address, and (3) the designation of the "optimum" policy for each

issue, based on the review. The focus on current kindergarten and school entry-age policies describes what schools are doing now and helps to identify the policies at issue. These current policies, as well as the rationale and assumptions on which they are based, can then be compared with the findings that emerge in the review of the research. The review of research, which follows, looks at studies on six issues on which current school policies differ. They are:

1. Kindergarten entry age
2. Length of the kindergarten day
3. Kindergarten placement criteria
4. Kindergarten retention practices
5. Kindergarten reading instruction
6. Kindergarten teaching strategies and instructional resources

This review is organized around three alternative policies for each issue. Each of these alternatives are evaluated and categorized on the basis of the empirical support for implementing them. These categories are: "Full Support", "Conditional Support", or " Little Support." For each issue, the policy alternative determined to be most supported by the research (i.e., the policy which falls into the "Full Support" category) is considered the "optimum" policy for districts to implement at this time. That is, it is the alternative that can be expected to maximize the academic growth and development of all children based on available knowledge.

Current Kindergarten and School Entry Age Policies

Although kindergarten policies vary from district to district (and even within districts), a composite profile of their policies can be derived using the results of

recent surveys (e.g., Wolf and Kessler, 1987; ERS, 1986; Bennett, 1986; Day, 1988). These surveys suggest the following trends:

* Kindergarten is the usual starting point for public supported education. Although there is a national trend (28 states) towards state prekindergarten programs for four-year-old children, most of these programs are only for "at-risk," low-income children, not the general population.
* About 95% of all five- to six-year-old children are enrolled in kindergarten programs across the country, though only seven states have actual legislation mandating kindergarten attendance. Most children typically attend a half-day (i.e., less than 3 hours) kindergarten program for about 9 months; however, about one-third of the states have established full-day kindergartens (California State Department of Education, 1988).
* Minimum kindergarten admission requirements are that the child be a resident of the state, 5 years old by September, and have a physical examination by a doctor. In addition to these prerequisites, some districts require maturity ratings, IQ or aptitude tests, and/or psychological examinations before or upon entry into kindergarten.
* Children's social, emotional, and language development receives primary attention in kindergarten and the principle focus of programs is on orientation to the school routine and preparation (i.e.,"readiness") for academic work in later grades (i.e., formal teaching of skills and content).
* Less than one half of the kindergartens reported that they taught either reading or reading readiness skills in kindergarten. Those that did teach these skills did so only to those considered "ready" (Bennett, 1986).

This brief profile of public school kindergartens shows that they operate today much as they have over the past fifty years, as physically part of the formal school but philosophically and educationally distinct (Durkin, 1987). More importantly, their policies and programs are neither well intergrated into the general school curriculum nor reflect findings from either current or established research (e.g., Humphery, 1983; Cohen, 1986; Hanson and Siegel, 1988). Their curriculum policies and operations validate this fact as do their guiding philosophies and assumptions which can be characterized as follows:

* with the exception of those classified as "at-risk," children are born into and nurtured in a stable home environment under the supervision of a caring and responsible adult all during their preschool years;
* the home environment provides the prekindergarten child with the language development and social structure necessary for subsequent success in school;
* a half-day kindergarten curriculum is both adequate and appropriate for the majority of 5- to 6-year-old children since the primary concern is for an introduction to school life and activities rather than for formal learning and skill development;
* a "readiness" curriculum is most appropriate for the kindergarten child since they are not developmentally "ready" for formal academic instruction in the basic skills areas until they are at least 6 years of age;
* kindergarten teachers should not provide their students with direct instruction in the basic academic skills or be provided with resources that would permit them to do so.

District policies which operate on these assumptions are increasingly difficult to justify and conflict with the research evidence. Based on national statistics, research findings, and the recommendations of noted educators and commissions on education, all of these assumptions can be considered myths; they have little or no empirical basis. Yet, schools continue to define their policies around them and, as educational indicators such as the illiteracy rate continue to climb, state legislatures and policy makers are still trying to figure out why our nation's students are achieving at such low levels (National Assessment for Educational Progress, 1989). The results of this analysis show that the philosophies and assumptions behind our nation's kindergarten programs need to be changed to accommodate the needs of preschool children in today's society. In the sections that follow, six educational policy issues related to school entry age and kindergarten are examined.

Kindergarten Entry Age

Although the federal government supported WPA nurseries during the Depression and currently funds a limited, but slowly increasing, number of Head Start programs (White and Buka, 1987), public education for most children begins when they enter kindergarten. The age at which a child may legally enter school, however, varies widely from state to state and even from district to district (Wolf and Kessler, 1987). Most school districts require that chronological age be used as the cut-off point for entry into school and leave the decision up to the parent as to whether the child is developmentally "ready" for school. Currently, 44 states (and

Washington D.C.) have state-mandated entry dates and, of those, 28 require that children turn five years of age on or before October 1.

However, twenty-one states have changed to an earlier date within the last 10 years and even districts within states appear to be following this trend (Driscoll, 1988). Massachusetts, for example, is one state that allows towns to choose their own cut-off dates. A recent survey by that state's department of education found that 42 percent of the school systems responding had changed to an earlier entry date in the past five years; another 30 percent indicated that changing to an earlier date was under discussion (Driscoll, 1988). In a review of state surveys on school entrance age, Wolf and Kessler (1987) conclude that "schools show a definite trend toward a requirement for children to be older upon entrance to school" (p.4).

This trend towards a later school entry age for our nation's children does not represent the most advantageous approach either in terms of our current knowledge of child development or contemporary family structure (e.g., Ambach, 1985). This trend is not based on empirical research, but on the myth that most 4- to 5-year-old children are not "developmentally ready" for the readiness and social curriculum of the typical half-day kindergarten program (Wolf and Kessler, 1987). This myth persists in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. For example, over twenty years ago the Educational Policies Commission (1966) stated:

> "A growing body of research and experience demonstrates that by age 6 most children have already developed a considerable part of the intellectual ability that they will possess as adults. Six is now generally accepted as the normal age of entrance to school. We believe that this practice is

obsolete. All children should have the opportunity to go to school at public expense - beginning at age 4." (p.1).

Research to support both earlier admission into kindergarten, as well as establishing programs that allow children to enter school at least by age four, has since flourished. Studies that have examined children who, for a variety of reasons, were admitted to kindergarten prior to the required starting age, consistently found that early admission resulted in more positive than negative outcomes (Proctor, Black, and Feldhausen, 1986; Wolf and Kessler, 1987). Further, most of the studies that looked at adjustment problems found no significant differences between early admissions and regular students. Where adjustment problems did appear, they disappeared in the early elementary grades. In long-term studies, students admitted early were found to excel academically, to have strong positive self-concepts, to participate in a wide range of extracurricular activities, to acquire more honors, and to be more likely to gain admissions to college (e.g., Hanson, Siegel, and Molina, 1988; Wolf and Kessler, 1987).

In addition, research supporting the establishment of public prekindergarten programs continues to accumulate. The long-term studies of children in the Perry Preschool Program in Ypsilanti, Michigan and the Harlem Head Start program in New York have shown that a high-quality preschool education for three- and four-year-olds should reduce dropout rates, criminal behavior, teen pregnancy, welfare dependency, and the need for later educational remediation (Butler, 1989; Cohen, 1986). A national follow-up study confirmed that students' high school reading achievement was related to preschool attendance as well as to other specific

preschool educational experiences (Siegel, 1987; 1990). In one report (Lazar, 1983a), the following effects from 12 longitudinal studies of preschool graduates were summarized as follows :

* increased individual IQ scores that remain significantly higher at least for 3 to 4 years after program attendance;
* higher mathematics and reading scores on standardized tests throughout elementary school;
* less likely to be referred to special education;
* less likely to be retained in grade; and
* more likely to graduate from high school.

Lazar (1983b), Goodlad (1983), the California Task Force for School Readiness, and the New York Early Childhood Education Commission have also concluded that state statues and regulations should be changed to allow children to enter school at age four.

Based on this information, the three alternatives regarding a school district's Kindergarten Entry Age policies can be described and supported as follows:

1. Little Support: 5 years old by September 1st
   This policy should be changed as soon as possible to one of the other policy options.
2. Conditional Support: 5 years old by December 31st
   Represents a viable compromise if the first alternative is not available.
3. Full Support : 4 years old by December 1st
   Recommended for all children and required for those in any "at-risk" category.

Length of Kindergarten Day

Contemporary family structure and life-styles, as well as comprehensive studies on the effects of full-day versus half-day preschool and kindergarten programs, show that the traditional half-day programs are both inappropriate and not tenable for most of today's children (Ambach, 1985; Wolf and Kessler, 1987). The number of women working outside of the home and the number of single-parent households make full-day programs the obvious choice for the vast majority of parents. One recent survey found that at least half of all infants have working mothers and fifty-nine percent of the mothers of 3-and 4-year-olds are employed outside the home (Day, 1988). The projection for the 1990's is that 9 out of 10 mothers, married or single, will be in the work force (McCormick, 1986). Further, between 1960 and 1985, the percentage of traditional households decreased from 60% to 7% (Futrell, 1987) and, presently, at least 20% of all American children currently live in homes without fathers (Bennett, 1987). Collectively, these data suggest that we can no longer assume that preschool children are being educated and cared for in the home by their parents prior to entering kindergarten; the vast majority of both fathers and mothers of preschoolers are out in the work force. The most reasonable option for these families, as indicated by the number of preschoolers in daycare, is to enroll their children in preschool programs that also offer day-care facilities.

The appropriateness of a half-day curriculum is further brought into question by several observations regarding changes in the characteristics of kindergarten children. A growing number of children entering kindergarten today have had previous preschool and day care experiences (Center for Educational

Statistics, 1987). Kindergarten teachers surveyed in the Educational Research Service Report (1986) indicated that 41% of their pupils had previously had at least one full year of day care, preschool , pre-kindergarten, and/or nursery school; similar results were reported by Nall (1983). Therefore, a great many children have already attended either a half-day or all-day preschool program before attending kindergarten - some for two or more years. Further, where only a half-day program is offered, children must often be bussed from their half-day kindergarten class to spend the remainder of the day in daycare centers.

It is also interesting to note that district policies limiting kindergarten to half-day classes and requiring a later school entry age have only been widely adopted during the last few decades; and *not* for reasons concerning the welfare of children. Prior to World War II, full-day kindergarten programs were more numerous in public schools. However, after World War II, when the number of children increased dramatically, kindergarten was shortened to a half-day due to the need for building space and to reduce personnel costs. Further, prior to the civil war, much younger children were allowed to attend public schools. At that time it was common practice for children as young as three years old to be sent off to school with their older siblings (Hall, 1963). Schools banned this practice, not out of any documented negative effects on the well-being of children (or objections from parents!), but because of funding problems associated with providing teachers and implementing programs for the growing number of children in school under the age of six (Strickland, 1982). Hence, not only are today's kindergarten students entering school at a later age than they were 20 years ago (Karweit, 1988), but they are also spending less time in the classroom.

The advantages of full-day prekindergarten and kindergarten programs over half-day programs have also begun to consistently emerge in the research literature (e.g, Lazar, 1983a; Berrueta-Clement, et al., 1984; Carnine, et al., 1988). This research and related reviews conclude that full-day programs have many benefits that impact not only students, but parents and teachers as well (Day , 1988; Wolf and Kessler, 1987; and Puelo, 1986). Summarizing studies on both short-term and long-term effects of full-day kindergarten, Karweit (1988) concluded that, although there was little evidence to date of any long-term effects, most indicated a clear pattern of positive short-term effects on school achievement. These include:

* better readiness test scores for entering first grade;
* better reading skills at the end of first grade;
* better self concepts and more positive attitudes towards school;
* lower rate of retention; and
* better basic skills scores (Humphery, 1983).

Given the pedagogical and logistical advantages for all concerned, public schools should provide full-day, high-quality kindergarten programs for all 4-year-old children. Such programs are both appropriate and beneficial for all young children, especially for those classified as "at-risk". Accordingly, the three policy alternatives pertaining to a school district's Length of Kindergarten Day policy would be evaluated as follows:

1. Little Support: Half day (3 hours) curriculum
2. Conditional Support: Full day (5 hours) curriculum without extended day care; appropriate in districts where most children have adult supervision available after school.

3. Full Support: Full day (5 hours) curriculum with extended daycare.

Kindergarten Placement Criteria

While Georgia is the only state to mandate that a specific test be used in deciding whether to promote kindergarten students, more than twenty-five states currently mandate developmental screening for 3- to 6-year-old children to determine their "readiness" for school (Miesels, 1987; ERS, 1986). The notion that children should not attend school until they are developmentally "ready" has a noble rationale. To "push" children out of their familiar home environment and away from their families before they are mature enough for the structure and academics of the classroom can cause them undue stress and emotional trauma. Long-term it could lead to a poor self-concept, burn-out, and school dropout (e.g., Elkind, 1988). Thus, to avoid the "hurried child" syndrome (Elkind, 1981) and be given "the gift of time", readiness tests are often used to delay a child's entry into kindergarten or a traditional first grade classroom. It has been argued that children deemed "unready" should be given an extra year to mature before they enter first grade which will subsequently boost their academic achievement and self-concept.

Unfortunately, this argument is another "Peltdown Man" (Glass, 1968) sold to the American public by well-meaning, but romantic, educators (Strickland, 1982). It is based on the questionable assumptions that (a) at least one responsible adult is at home all day providing the preschool child with the necessary educational and social experiences to be successful in school, and (b) "readiness" tests are valid descriptors of current status and predictors of future development and/or school achievement . These assumptions are simply not true. As indicated earlier, today

it is the exception, rather than the rule, for preschool children to have the benefit of a full-time, responsible adult providing them with the full repertoire of experiences necessary for success in school. Further, the proportion of children from "at-risk" groups, where such attention is less likely to be found (e.g., minorities, low SES, single parent), is increasing dramatically. Hence, the likelihood that the majority of children will have experienced the attention and adult supervision that was more common in the past will continue to decrease.

In regard to readiness testing, the Gesell School Readiness Test and the Gesell Preschool Tests, both widely used screening tests, have been reviewed by at least four independent testing experts in the Ninth Mental Measurements Yearbook and judged by all to lack the reliability and validity for placement purposes (Mitchell, 1985; Meisels, 1987; Shepard and Smith, 1988). Further, in a survey of 177 school districts in New York State, only 16 of the 151 different tests or procedures used for screening were considered even marginally appropriate. Similar results were found in Michigan where fewer then 10 of the 111 tests were deemed appropriate (Meisels, 1987). The Metropolitan Readiness Test, one of the more reliable tests, has an error rate of about 30% when used for placement purposes (Gold, 1988; Shepard and Smith, 1988). This test is designed to guide instructional planning in a regular classroom and is valid only for this purpose. No readiness test to date has ever been shown to provide long-term predictive validity for academic success (Wolf and Kessler, 1987).

Tests that label children not "ready" and delay them from entering kindergarten or the mainstream educational system, are not only misused and unethical, but they deny children their constitutional right to enter school, attain

access to a free education, and therefore, to equal protection under the law. These rights were upheld in a petition filed with the New York State Department of Education. The parents of a five-year-old girl filed a class action appeal on behalf of all of a school district's developmental kindergarten students. The petition, accompanied by affidavits from three expert witnesses harshly criticizing the Gesell, alleged that the district's use of the Gesell School Readiness Test violated a number of state and federal laws. These included the children's right under state law to enter kindergarten at age five, to equal protection and due process under the U.S. and New York constitutions, and their rights under §504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, and New York special education law (Schumack, 1988).

In addition, position papers critical of blanket standardized testing for young children have been issued by three national early childhood organizations. The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists (1987) criticized these practices for assigning the "burden" of scholastic success to young children, exposing children to the risk of "failure, apathy toward school, and demoralization", and failing to ensure quality education. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1988) asserted that there is an absence of research to document the long-term effects of delayed enrollment or promotion as a result of school readiness tests scores. The National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE, 1989) criticized the testing for denying or discouraging young children's entrance into regular programs for which they are eligible leading to increased retention, and labeling children as failures at the beginning of their academic careers.

In summary, even though the reasons for using standardized "readiness" tests may be well-meaning, such tests, like other standardized tests, have limited utility as indicators of current achievement (e.g., Hanson and Schutz, 1986) and are simply not valid predictors of a student's later development or schooling success. Further, by keeping children out of the educational mainstream, these tests violate state laws and constitutional rights, label children as failures, and as discussed in the next section, actually produce negative, long-term educational consequences. In essence, schools should use "readiness" tests only to facilitate curriculum planning and to identify children who may need special services or profit from a modified program in order to optimize their skill development. Accordingly, the three options given below provide a basis for evaluating a school district's Kindergarten Placement Criteria policy:

1. Little Support: Readiness Test Score and Maturity Ratings

   This approach is least desirable since these variables change rapidly, are difficult to measure, and may or may not reflect perceived educationally relevant skills and potential required by the actual instructional programs of the school.

2. Conditional Support: Academic Skills and Curriculum-Based Assessments

   Place all children in kindergarten except those found to lack all academic skills required in the programs to be used. Decisions regarding such children should be based on test results linked to actual instructional programs, coupled with teacher evaluations and parental approval. One possible arrangement would be an intensive parent/school partial day

transitional program with the goal of normal promotion to the next grade with the child's same-age peers at the end of the transitional year.

3. Full support: Age Only

Place all children in kindergarten using age basis only. The only exceptions are for children exhibiting extreme behavior that would warrant special education status. Such children should be referred for a full assessment and evaluation of their social, academic, and family background before placement in any non-mainstream classroom.

Kindergarten Retention Practices

Denying kindergarten age children entry into school, retaining them, or placing them in developmental programs, either for academic or developmental reasons, are common practices today in most school districts in the United States. Such policies are generally mandated by school boards at the request of administrators who are dissatisfied with the academic status of students (Thompson, 1979; Bucko, 1986). The rationale for these practices is basically the same as for "readiness" testing: to give children time to mature, a chance for greater subsequent achievement and success in school, and an improved self-concept. Theoretically, retention is purported to provide the chance for children to "catch up" academically and developmentally by being exposed to easier materials, more suited to their abilities.

This widely accepted rationale has no empirical basis. The origins of this myth are embodied in an elitist, romantic ideology about childhood that grossly neglects the reality and needs of the majority of children. It relies on the

assumption that most families can adequately provide the necessary financial, emotional, educational, and custodial support for their preschool children and, therefore, children have comparable opportunities to acquire the social, academic, and psychomotor skills required for success in school. In reality, most families today are neither comparable nor able to do all of these things. Compared to the growing number of children in "at-risk" population groups across the United States, preschool children from intact families, copiously cared for in their homes by a competent adult, now represent a small, elite minority. Moreover, children from these "average" families obviously have more support and opportunities to acquire the necessary background skills than those in the "at risk" population groups.

Retention practices simply produce negative educational consequences. Children who have been in less advantaged preschool environments are taken out of the educational mainstream which further retards their academic growth, marks them as "slow learners," and contributes to a poor self-concept (Wolf and Kessler, 1987). Further, even the slight advantage they have in achievement by being a year or more older than their classmates, dissipates by third or fourth grade. Thus, any advantage due to maturation simply disappears (Shepard, 1989; Shepard and Smith, 1988).

Although numerous studies compiled on grade retention, delayed entry, and developmental programs have overwhelming produced arguments against these practices, many parents and educators remain unconvinced (Shepard and Smith, 1988; Smith 1989; Medway, 1986). In one national survey, 44% of the teachers responding indicated that "automatic promotion to the next grade" was a "major

cause" of student difficulties in school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1989). A study surveying attitudes toward repeating a grade (Byrnes, 1988) indicated the majority of teachers, principals, and parents, even parents of retained children, supported retention as a means to correct deficient academic skills. These opinions matched those of the general public (Gallup Poll, 1983).

The arguments generated by the educators to justify these practices rely on philosophical beliefs and attitudes rather than any empirical studies (Wolf and Kessler, 1983; 1987). That is, they believe these practices are beneficial to students based on their personal theoretical orientations and perceptions which are validated solely through testimonials by other individuals, interest groups, and immediate benefits to the school organization and operations (Driscoll, 1988, Shepard and Smith, 1988; Smith, 1989). Extensive results from longitudinal studies completed in different countries over the past 30 years show there is absolutely no empirical support for these practices (Jackson, 1975).

Although much has been written about the negative consequences of grade retention for many years (e.g., Plummer, Lineberger, and Grazino, 1986; Jackson, 1975), Shepard and Smith (1989; 1990) have compiled most of the references to date on the major studies of retention and its effects on both students' academic achievement and self-concept. They conclude that retaining students in any form (e.g., delaying admission and placement in developmental classes) is contrary to all of the research evidence. Although retention seems to have the greatest negative effects on measures of achievement, the overall stigmatizing effect on the children being retained is also substantial. Research focussing exclusively on kindergarten retention has shown, for example, that even the self-concepts of kindergarten

students are not exempt from the trauma of being held back. These children perceive retention as something that happens to you for being bad or doing bad work and, when interviewed, expressed feelings of anger, embarrassment, and/or denial at having been "flunked" (Byrnes, 1988; Shepard and Smith, 1990).

In addition to the direct effects of retention on children, educators must also be aware of the legal implications of the practice. Since there are no empirically validated operational criteria for retention and grade placement, these decisions can only be based on subjective data and the philosophical and theoretical orientation of school personnel. Hence, students are retained in an arbitrary and inconsistent manner both within and across schools. Moreover, those retained often disproportionally represent "at-risk" groups (e.g., low SES, male, and ethnic minorities) (Thompson, 1980). Although the courts usually defer to school officials on promotion/retention decisions based on multiple criteria, they look more closely at decisions based on a single criterion (e.g., a "readiness" test) as well as on those that have a disproportionate impact on minority groups (Stroup and Zirkel, 1983). Further, as occurred in the New York class action petition, if the placement results in the student being taken out of the mainstream educational system, the move can legally classify the student as handicapped and all laws and regulations governing the rights and education of the handicapped then apply (Schumack, 1988).

The current knowledge base on retention, developmental programs, and delayed entry into kindergarten overwhelmingly indicates that these practices should be abolished in kindergarten and the primary grades (Shepard and Smith, 1988). This is not to say that automatic promotion to the next grade is going to solve the

problems of students usually retained. What the research does indicate is, if children require remediation, simply holding them back a year, or placing them in a developmental class (which in essence does the same thing) will have more negative consequences for them than passing them on to the next grade.

Such findings make these practices both indefensible and an outrage. The solution to remediating students requires the implementation of a specific educational intervention plan, preferably before, but at least during kindergarten to address the deficiencies; retention is part of the problem, not the solution. Based on this body of research, the following evaluation should apply to a school district's Kindergarten Retention policy:

1. Little Support: Regular use of retention (10% or more).
2. Conditional Support: Rarely used (less than 1%).

   Students are retained only when they meet explicitly defined criteria. One such set would include all of the following: they are young for their grade (i.e., have a late birthday), lack all prerequisite skills for first grade instructional programs, and (3) the parents approve of retention.
3. Full Support: Retention is not an option; it is not permitted and alternative programs are used to accommodate differences in learning.

Kindergarten Reading Instruction

The rationale used for not uniformly starting formal reading instruction in kindergarten is the same as that used for rejecting direct instruction in any of the basic academic skills at this level. That is, young children are deemed not "ready" for formal instruction in academics and their emotional and social development

would be affected by teaching them to read. Although surveys show most educators support the notion of providing preschool children with "opportunities" to learn to read and/or providing instruction to those who are "ready" to read, they continue to caution against "pushing" children to read by systematically introducing beginning reading skills to all kindergarten children (e.g., Bennett, 1986; ERS, 1986).

Such recommendations have no empirical basis and can trace their origins to the progressive education movement of the thirties and one flawed and heavily criticized study (i.e., Morphett and Washburne, 1931). On the other hand, support for early reading practices has consistently emerged in the literature (e.g., Gates, 1936; 1939) and has continued to increase since the 1960's (e.g., Hillerich, 1977; Teal, 1980; Ollila, 1980; Mason, 1984; Beck, 1986). Although many of these studies concerned preschool children who learned to read at home (e.g., Clark, 1976; Durkin,1966), others examined children who were systematically taught to read in preschool and kindergarten programs (e.g., Hanson and Schutz, 1978; McKee, Brzieinski, and Harrison, 1966; Stanchfield, 1971). All concluded that children who learn to read early have a distinct advantage over those who do not . They also show that beginning reading skills can be successfully taught to kindergarten children from all backgrounds and require only about 25 minutes per day. Further, virtually no evidence was found that early reading instruction had any negative effects such as to the student's visual acuity, emotional stability, and interest in school reading. Mason (1984) concluded in her review of the research on this issue:

" ...while some educators still argue for a maturational approach for reading preparation, their position has been severely eroded by mounting evidence that early reading instruction benefits young children" (p. 536).

The results of an extensive national follow-up study on kindergarten reading showed that students who learn to read early maintain their academic advantage into adulthood. Those students who had been given formal beginning reading instruction in kindergarten showed better reading skills and attitudes towards reading as seniors in high school, less need for remediation at all levels of schooling, and better grades in both elementary and high school (Hanson and Siegel, 1988). The success of formal kindergarten reading programs in Project Follow Through (Stallings and Stipek , 1986), the Seattle Public Schools, and at the University of Alabama (Carnine et al., 1988) are further indicative of the later academic benefits of early reading instruction. Collectively, these studies provide strong support for both the appropriateness and long-term benefits of early reading instruction and show virtually no evidence to support the notion that it has any long-term, negative effects.

Based on this body of research, the following evaluations are given to three district policy options regarding Kindergarten Reading Instruction policy:

1. Little Support: Reading readiness and language experience in kindergarten with formal reading instruction to begin in first grade.
2. Conditional Support: Reading readiness and some beginning reading instruction in kindergarten (most appropriate where students have little or n readiness skills).

3. Full Support: Schools begin formal reading programs in kindergarten and include all children.

Kindergarten Teaching Strategies and Instructional Resources

As anyone in the field of early education can tell you, there has been a battle raging over the philosophical issues of preschool education for a number of years (e.g., Pines, 1966). At one level there is absolutely no disagreement; all agree that preschoolers should be provided with a curriculum that is "developmentally" appropriate for them. Also, most educators will agree that a "high-quality" program consists of a "balanced curriculum" for the "total" child (e.g., Warger, 1988). The actual battle begins to rage, however, when they go beyond these general goals and educational jargon and start to define the particulars such as the specific teaching strategies and resources that actually operationalize the curriculum. Should teachers use predominantly discovery or direct instruction teaching strategies? Should the instructional resources be structured or unstructured (i.e., published or teacher-made)? These and many similar questions lead to conflicting answers from early childhood educators and mark their philosophical differences.

Research that has accumulated over the past decade, however, has provided educators with some guidelines in answering these contentious questions. For example, although one recent review reached no definitive conclusions (Powell, 1987), most research conducted on the issue of whether a preschool curriculum based on direct instruction is more effective than one emphasizing the traditional child development approach (i.e., readiness and discovery), has generally found that direct instruction is by far more effective (e.g., Carnine, et al., 1987;

Rosenshine, 1986; Wisler, Burns and Iwamoto, 1978; Gersten and Keating, 1986; Stallings and Stipek , 1986). Further, direct instruction teaching strategies have also been cited as a central feature of successful early educational practices in other cultures (e.g., Stevensson, 1971; Sakamoto, 1981). The rationale associated with *not* using direct instruction strategies in early childhood programs includes the assumptions that: (1) direct instruction is not developmentally appropriate for today's kindergarten children, (2) direct instruction ignores the necessary social and emotional needs of these children (Gersten, et al, 1988), and (3) since kindergarten children do not need to be taught basic skills, they do not need published (external) materials that incorporate direct instruction strategies.

Based on current research and the characteristics of contemporary preschool children, these assumptions are highly questionable. Children's competency in basic skills begins to develop with the emergence of language and is largely influenced by their educational environment from that time on (Hanson and Siegel, 1989). The educational environment of preschool children today, however, is dramatically different from that of only a generation ago in a number of ways. For example, nowdays most children have been involved in academic programs using structured materials and direct instructional methods for several years before entering kindergarten. Preschool programs in places like churches (e.g., Sunday school and Mothers Day Out), public and private schools, day care centers (e.g., Head Start), and on educational television (e.g., Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers) have greatly impacted the skills and abilities of children entering kindergarten. The most often cited benefits of these changes in the preschool educational environment are the increased levels of verbal skills, concepts, and reading ability

observed in children up to age ten. (e.g., Hanson and Kelble, 1985; Hanson and Siegel, 1988; Durkin, 1966, 1986; White, Willson, and Fuqua, 1985). Further, the educational toys, workbooks, computer software, and other enrichment products now widely available, as well as the strong likelihood of frequent interactions with school-aged friends or siblings, have directly affected the skills and abilities of young children. These findings indicate the skills typically taught in the traditional kindergarten curriculum are no longer developmentally appropriate since most are acquired before entering school. Collectively, they raise serious doubts about *not* using direct instruction and structured program resources to uniformly begin teaching the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics in kindergarten (Clay, 1972).

The success of systematically developed programs, incorporating direct instructional strategies to teach basic skills to preschool children, is also indicative of the inappropriateness of the traditional "readiness" curriculum. National studies have confirmed the positive results of using such programs to teach beginning reading skills to kindergarten students (Hanson and Schutz, 1978). Also, as mentioned previously, the related follow-up study, carried out 12 years later, found that as a group, the high school seniors who had received this reading instruction in kindergarten had higher reading achievement scores, less need for remediation, and better grades in and attitudes toward reading than the seniors from the same districts who had not (Hanson and Siegel, 1988). Several other longitudinal studies have also examined and described the effects of implementing these high-quality basic skills programs using direct instruction strategies at the kindergarten level (e.g., Carnine, et al., 1988; Gersten and George, 1990; Stallings and Stipek, 1986).

They include the National Follow Through Project, a six-year study of thirteen different approaches to teaching disadvantaged students in kindergarten through 3rd grade; a nine-year longitudinal study carried out by Weisberg (1987) with 108 4- and 5-year old children; and a longitudinal study conducted by the Seattle public schools evaluating their direct instruction preschool programs for 4- and 5-year olds. The computerized kindergarten program "Writing to Read" has also been evaluated in a number of district studies (e.g., West, 1985; Levinson and Lalor, 1989) and, although costly and difficult to implement, shows some preliminary positive effects on later school achievement. Collectively, the results and conclusions of these studies document that those students who participated in kindergarten and preschool programs using systematically developed published materials that incorporate direct instruction to teach basic skills had achievement gains in all basic skills areas, IQ gains, increased placement in gifted programs, reduced retention, reduced absenteeism, reduced dropout rates, and increased acceptance to college (Carnine, et al., 1988; Hanson and Siegel, 1988; Carnine, Silbert, and Kameenui, 1990).

Gersten, et al. (1988) have summarized some of the reasons why these carefully developed programs are so successful; they are based on theory and research and incorporate developmentally appropriate activities and teaching strategies. These programs begin, in a step-by-step fashion, to build the skills and knowledge necessary for continued success. Also, they mix in a variety of games and interesting activities to keep motivation high, encourage the participation of all children, and emphasize positive reinforcement to ensure student success and progress. Such programs, typically requiring 25 minutes a day or less, hardly

produce the image of high-stress, paper-and-pencil, skill-and-drill activities painted by many early childhood professionals. Other aspects of curriculum and lesson design, teaching strategies, and teacher training are also important and are described in detail elsewhere (i.e., Gersten and George, 1990; Hanson and Siegel, 1988).

Systematically developed programs are often referred to as "highly" structured and criticized for keeping teachers focussed on the program rather than on the children and, thereby, "robbing" them of their professionalism and creativity (Johnson, et al., 1980). These programs, however, have been shown to be the most effective, both in terms of student achievement and teacher satisfaction. At the kindergarten level, such programs are usually not available and, when they are, are often ignored to in favor of more "lightly" structured programs that leave the specifics up to the teacher. The assumption associated with this practice is that such arrangements will lead to developmentally oriented programs that allow the teacher to "provide the best fit with the rapidly changing developmental pattern of kindergarten age children" (Johnson, et al., 1980, p. 82). However, little research can be found to support these claims and bear out this assumption. On the contrary, both solicited and unsolicited responses from teachers, administrators, and parents involved in these programs/studies were overwhelmingly positive about the results (e.g., Hanson and Schutz, 1978; Gersten and George, 1990). In one study (Wirt, 1978), even teachers who reported that such programs often seemed "boring" to them, admitted that they "worked" for the students.

These programs are also supported by the Effective Teaching research (e.g., Hunter, 1982; Davis and Thomas, 1989; Whittrock, 1986; Rosenshine, 1979) which shows that effective classroom instruction has several common

characteristics. It requires a well-researched body of skills and knowledge, programs and resources that are systematically implemented and delivered, frequent feedback on the pupil's work, sufficient time for positive practice, a high rate of success on the skills taught, and reteaching for pupils having problems. Thus, it would seem logical that programs that have these characteristics "built in" would produce higher rates of student achievement than those less carefully developed. This logic is borne out in the evaluation of such programs implemented in kindergarten and preschool classes (Hanson, Schutz, and Bailey, 1977; Carnine, et al., 1988; Gersten and George 1990).

Research involving a systematically developed kindergarten beginning reading program has also linked the *level* of program implementation directly to student achievement, measured both concurrently (Hanson and Schutz, 1978) and later (Hanson and Siegel, 1988). That is, the more lessons that were implemented by the teacher, the higher their students' reading achievement, *regardless of the background characteristics of either the teacher or the students*. In another comparative study, three beginning reading programs, each designed to teach beginning reading skills to kindergarten pupils in over 1,000 classes in school districts across the United States, were evaluated (Hanson, Schutz, and Bailey, 1977). All three programs were designed to operate as the primary resource for kindergarten level reading instruction. The analyses of the programs showed that although all three programs recommended that the teacher spend 20-30 minutes a day on instruction, there were considerable differences in instructional emphasis, the amount of time and resources required, staff training, and cost. In comparing the overall level of student proficiency obtained through the use of each of these

programs, the systematically developed, direct instruction reading program showed the strongest relationship between implementation (i.e., number of lessons taught) and student achievement. Furthermore, it produced these higher levels of proficiency with the lowest time and resource requirements for implementation. That is, it was both effective and efficient in a variety of school contexts. In the 1987 follow-up study on this same program, findings indicated that those high school seniors participating in this beginning reading program in kindergarten, not only had better reading skills than other students who did not participate in it, but also better reading skills than those who participated in only a portion of it (i.e., completed less than 7 out of 10 program units) (Hanson and Siegel, 1988).

The success of direct instruction in basic skills for preschool children makes it clear that such programs should be central to a balanced curriculum for high-quality preschool programs. Also, as Spodek (1988) has pointed out, to judge a program in terms of child development principles alone infers that enhancing children's knowledge is not an important goal in early childhood education. He further asserts that if kindergarten programs are to improve, educators must make explicit what is being taught and why. Currently, the curriculum for most kindergartens across the United States consists of a series of arbitrary and random activities defined by the philosophies, attitudes, and abilities of the individual teachers. However, schooling effects research suggests that the curriculum should logically consist of systematically implemented programs that are defined by a specific set of resources detailing the scope and sequence of the skills to be taught, appropriate enabling activities, and criterion-referenced evaluations for monitoring student progress and providing implementation feedback. A kindergarten

curriculum operationally defined by programs, resources, and implementation practices is one way to explicate a curriculum for student achievement, regardless of teacher characteristics.

Based on this body of research, the following options and accompanying "innocence" rating scale applies to a school district's Kindergarten Instructional Procedures and Materials policy:

1. Little Support: No direct instruction in or systematically developed programs for teaching basic skills.
2. Conditional Support: Direct instruction using school/teacher-made resources for teaching basic skills.
3. Full Support: Systematically developed programs incorporating direct instruction for teaching basic skills.

Policies Promoting Optimum Student Achievement

Providing the best possible educational experience for kindergarten children should be a goal of all schools. Using the foregoing information, the policy alternatives that address this goal can be easily identified. Table 1 summarizes this information by listing each alternative for the six policy issues and assigning values of 1, 2, and 3, respectively, to the three corresponding evaluations of "Little Support", "Conditional Support", and "Full Support." School districts can evaluate their own policy in each of the six areas and obtain an overall score that would range from 6 to 18 points. This produces a kind of "innocence" scale for the kindergarten educational policies of a school district. For example, schools receiving an overall score in the range of 6 to 9 points would be rated as "Low",

those in the range of 10 to 14 points "Moderate", and those in the range of 15 to 18 points would have a "High" rating in terms of their policies of promoting student achievement in kindergarten.

Insert Table 1 about here

Further, using those policy alternatives identified by a "3" as a guide (see Table 1), a profile characterizing a model kindergarten educational setting emerges. This "optimum achievement" model suggests that all four-year-old children should be allowed to enter full-day, high-quality kindergarten programs that provide extended daycare services both before and after school. Furthermore, age would be the only criteria for legal entry into school without reliance on placement tests. The content of the curriculum would be balanced in that it would provide for all aspects of the children's well-being, including the areas of health and nutrition, physical fitness, and safety. Also, it would include the implementation of well-developed programs to ensure that all students were provided with direct instruction in the basic skills of reading, mathematics, and language arts in a systematic and developmentally appropriate fashion; these programs would be carefully linked to instruction in subsequent grades. Students having difficulty in particular skill areas would be provided with supplementary instruction that would require minimum absence from the mainstream classroom. All assessments for placement, progress, and attainment would be curriculum-based and criterion-referenced. Norm-referenced tests would be used only for diagnostic purposes with children clearly having special needs and to assist in curriculum planning. All children at the

primary level would be promoted to the next grade; those whose skills were significantly below grade level would be assigned to clearly defined remediation programs involving small tutorial classes, reinforcement and enabling activities in the home, and/or additional school attendance (i.e., on Saturday or during the summer).

Summary and Conclusions

The research reviewed in this paper focused on six early educational issues for which empirical studies have been found to be directly linked to the achievement level of children. For each of these issues, policy alternatives were reviewed and evaluated. Based on the surveys of current practices in kindergarten, it is clear that the best options are not the norm in today's schools. The alternatives implemented are often those couched in myths, tradition, and outdated norms rather than supported by empirical research and a realistic view of the child's world today. For example, the curriculum of most early childhood programs has ignored the early educational experiences of young children in contemporary society. The general notion that formal schooling experiences of children should begin at about age five or six with kindergarten, and that formal reading instruction should begin in first grade at about six or seven, has been the accepted standard across the country for the last 100 years.

The early education policies of most school districts, however, fail to take into account that "developmental appropriateness" is a normative scale referring to what most children can do at a particular age or stage of development. Therefore, skills considered "developmentally appropriate" for 4- and 5-year-old children a

hundred years ago are no longer "developmentally appropriate" for today's 4 - and 5-year-old children. During the past decade, the majority of preschool age children have been enrolled in daycare and/or early educational programs before entering kindergarten. Furthermore, studies have documented that the characteristics of preschool children have changed in a number of ways, such as increased levels of verbal skills and concepts and reading ability. At the same time, the federally sponsored preschool program such as Head Start, and the TV series, Sesame Street, have both proven to be extremely successful in impacting the educational experiences of young children over the past 20 years.

These documented changes in the educational characteristics of young children, as well as the increase in the number of public school programs for four-year-old children and the strong prospect of federal child care legislation, indicate that the national trend toward more and earlier educational experiences for children will not only continue, but increase. Collectively, such data provide the basis for district policy makers to alter their beliefs about the nature and appropriateness of the preschool curriculum and implement the more beneficial policy alternatives rated as having "Full Support" in Table 1.

The research reviewed in this article clearly suggests that district policy makers are no longer "innocent" of the negative, stigmatizing, and counterproductive effects produced by unsound policies and malpractices. In the past, school districts had the option of alining their policies with any philosophy, belief, or line of research patronized by early childhood professionals (e.g., Strickland, 1982); however, allowing such choices today, regardless of the economic or political advantages, is not ethical. Direct linkages have been clearly

established between certain educational policies and student achievement, attitudes, and drop-out rates. To continue to ignore reality and implement policies that result in less than optimal educational benefits for children is unethical, unconscionable, and a grave injustice to both children and society at large.

This review of the literature suggests that policies for school entry age and kindergarten programs should include:

1. providing *all* children with the opportunity to participate in high-quality, extended-day programs beginning *at least* by age four;
2. implementing direct instruction in basic academic skills as the central component of a balanced curriculum for all four-to six-year-old children;
3. providing teachers with systematically developed programs and resources to insure that all required skills are taught in an appropriate fashion and sequence to ensure optimal learning for students;
4. implementing a formal beginning reading program no later than five years of age;
5. abolishing practices that delay legal entry into kindergarten, place students in developmental classes, or retain them in grade at the primary level.

Traditions, myths, and wishful thinking continue to dictate many early schooling policies. Like an ostrich with its head buried in the sand, school districts have seemingly ignored research findings that have profound implications for altering the future achievement levels of students. With few exceptions, their early childhood programs are in a cultural time warp with policies based on dated norms and false assumptions. The list of suggested policies and practices compiled by this research effort provides an early education model for school districts that should

increase the future achievement level and literacy rate of students and suggests some components of a more realistic and developmentally appropriate curriculum. While additional research and a changing society may one day refute what has been concluded here, educators have a professional and ethical obligation to respond to the knowledge base that has accumulated to date.

Bloom (1981) provided an exceptionally accurate prediction of today's early educational policies when he expressed his concern that the advances in our understanding of education would not always be reflected in our educational policies and practices. Although he placed the burden of responsibility for appropriate actions and policies on the professionals in the field, he was also convinced that little would be done until the meaning and consequences of these advances could be communicated to educational leaders and teachers. "But long experience in education has left me with the impression that innocence is not easily relinquished and new responsibilities are avoided as long as possible" (p.28).

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Table 1. Innocence Rating Scale for school district kindergarten policy options.

School Entry Age

____1. Little Support:
5 years old by September 1st
____2. Conditional Support:
5 years old by December 31st
____3. Full Support:
4 years old by September 1st

Length of Kindergarten Day

____1. Little Support:
Half day (3 hours) curriculum
____2. Conditional Support:
Full day (5 hours) curriculum
____3. Full Support:
Full day (5 hours) curriculum and 5 hours of daycare

Kindergarten Placement Criteria

____1. Little Support:
Age, readiness test score, and maturity
____2. Conditional Support:
Age and academic skills
____3. Full Support:
Age only

Kindergarten Retention Practices

____1. Little Support:
Regularly practiced; 10% or more of students are retained.
____2. Conditional Support:
Rarely practiced; less than 1% of students are retained.
____3. Full Support:
Not an option; not practiced at all.

Kindergarten Beginning Reading Instruction

____1. Little Support:
Reading readiness only.
____2. Conditional Support:
Reading readiness first, followed by beginning reading instruction.
____3. Full Support:
Formal reading instruction begins in kindergarten.

Kindergarten Teaching Strategies and Instructional Resources

____1. Little Support:
No allocated time for direct instruction in basic skills or use of systematically developed programs.
____2. Conditional Support:
Allocated instructional time for direct instruction basic skills without systematically developed programs.
____3. Full Support:
Allocated instructional time for direct instruction in basic skills using systematically developed programs.

____ Total Points

6-9 Points: Low Achievement 10-14 Points: Moderate Achievement 15-18 Points: High Achievement